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The Excesses of Birth Control

Address delivered before the Sixth International Neo-Malthusian
and Birth Control Conference

HOTEL MCALPIN, NEW YORK CITY

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BY

LOUIS I. DUBLIN, PH. D., Statistician
Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, New York

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The Excesses of Birth Control

By

LOUIS I. DUBLIN, PH. D., *Statistician*

METROPOLITAN LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY, NEW YORK

When your President graciously extended her invitation to me to read a paper before this Congress, I very frankly reminded her that I was generally considered an "anti," and, that in my writings I had, by implication, criticized rather severely the current propaganda of the Birth Control League; that I considered your movement in its present form a distinct social danger and that I, therefore, could not support it. Imagine my surprise when I received Mrs. SANGER's reply urging me to accept a place on your programme for the very reason that she wanted my dissenting views placed before your Convention—"We want to be guided by facts," she said. Of course, I was completely disarmed and here I am within the ranks of the enemy and entirely at your mercy.

Let me say at the outset that I consider your invitation not only a fine courtesy, but a very real privilege. That I disagree with your founder does not alter my sincere respect for her. I admire her courage, her sincerity and her readiness to tackle a difficult social question in spite of the obstacles which constantly have been placed in her path. However great our disagreement may be, regarding the means of attaining the common goal—an efficient and happy society—I fully agree with her that the problem of birth control in all its ramifications is one which sincere and decent people must discuss. We can get absolutely nowhere by burying our heads in the sand and pretending that no problem exists; or that we must avoid its discussion as something unmentionable and even contaminating. Honest men and women should not avoid or fear to discuss openly any question so vital to their well-being.

Why, then, do I disagree with you? It is because your propaganda until yesterday has been based essentially on an emotional reaction and not on a scientific analysis. You have observed, as everyone else has, that there are poverty-stricken

and diseased people whose families are far too large for their own good or for the good of the community in which they live. Granted; but does that justify a nationwide programme of broadcasting contraceptive information without reserve? You do not appear to have considered that the problem of birth control is only one aspect of the larger population problem. There is a bigger issue than the immediate preference of the individual. The very life of the State is involved as soon as we begin to tamper with who shall and who shall not be born. My objection has been that your programme has been elaborated prematurely, without due regard to the permanent interest of the State; without adequate consideration of the real population tendencies which today prevail; without sufficient regard to the reliability and safety of the procedures that you recommend and to the consequences on the spiritual life of those who are influenced by your advices. I am afraid that your effort will simply replace an evil of which we are fully aware and which we all deplore with even greater evils lurking less obviously in the background. There is need for caution; for you are playing with fire. Mistakes in population policy are more easily made than rectified.

I shall now proceed to consider some of my objections in detail. There is first, your disregard of the interest of the State. One would think from reading your literature that the matter of parenthood was entirely an individual affair. As one gentleman recently put it "I suit myself with regard to the number of my children. I owe the State nothing." This attitude is obviously very short-sighted and indefensible. It serves, however, to focus attention to the conflict between the immediate interests of the individual and the more permanent interests of the State. The average man or woman generally determines his or her personal conduct without much consideration to the good of the community. We are most of us rather selfish and need very little encouragement to avoid parental responsibility. It is often pleasanter and always easier to keep the number of our dependents down to a minimum. Today, we live; tomorrow, we die. But, the logical consequence of such attitudes is nothing short of a challenge to the permanence of the State. Society, accordingly, seeks to protect itself against such a contingency. It expresses a general disapproval of celibacy and proscribes the dissemination of birth control practices. On the other hand, it recognizes the dignity of parenthood and as

a crudely constructive measure, it has recently begun to take into consideration the number of children as an item in fixing the amount of taxes. In some countries, as Professor DOUGLAS has told us, the size of the family is becoming a factor in determining the amount of extra compensation of the worker. These are a few initial steps in the plan of the State to make more attractive to its people the obligation of parenthood. The State insists on its perpetuation and cannot condone or argue its own suicide. We may express our freedom as individuals only within the limitation that the continued existence of the State is assured.

The birth control problem is, secondly, only one aspect of the larger population question and will never be settled satisfactorily except as the larger issue is solved. Your propaganda to date has emphasized almost altogether the necessity for population reduction as though there could be no doubt of over-population in the United States. I shall be willing enough to admit when I go home by subway tonight that there are too many people in the world, and I have often felt that way in considering the congested areas of our large cities. These undoubtedly represent ineffective community organization. On the other hand, we have a problem of under-population in our open rural areas. But neither picture alone justifies a snap judgment on the present status of our population, whether it contains too many or too few people. A sound population analysis is called for, which would attempt to relate our present population structure to the natural resources of the country and the efficiency with which we utilize our resources. These are highly technical matters which cannot be decided out of hand, not even by generous and high-minded people. If there ever was a question which called for expert handling, it is this one. For this reason, the American Statistical Association at its recent meeting in Chicago gave five sessions to the consideration of the various phases of the population problem as it confronts America today. It was illuminating to note the great variety of opinion that still prevails among serious students of social science on virtually every topic under discussion. Where there are so many conflicting points of view, there is little room for easy dogmatizing. There can be, in fact, no simple solution, and no ready panaceas in a matter of this sort.

But, if there is no consensus of opinion on details, there is at least general agreement that the population problem can

be attacked only through long and intensive study of our present composition with due regard to the natural resources of the country, to our future immigration policy, to the organization of industry, the improvement of our channels of distribution, the training and direction of our labor supply and a host of other factors which will determine the limits of our future population. Such an approach is a hopeful and constructive one. It is a far cry from the hasty and rather depressing assumptions which have determined the policy of your organization. Without much hesitation, you have ascribed most of our social and economic troubles to over-population and have proceeded to remedy them by striking at the very root of our procreating capacity.

3. This leads to my third objection, namely, that you have not read correctly the current tendencies in our population growth. Your impression that our numbers are increasing too rapidly might perhaps follow from a cursory examination of the population figures of the country, but not from a more intensive study of the facts. It is true that past decades have shown large increases; but, we must not forget that this growth certainly in recent years, has been mainly the result of immigration and the relatively high fertility of the newcomers. It is only in the southern states and in the rural communities that the native population has much more than maintained itself in late years. Now that immigration has been almost completely cut off as a source of population increase, we must look to the fertility of the groups within the country and learn what the conditions of natural increase are among them. After careful study of the situation, I have become convinced that we are, in fact, rapidly approaching a condition of a stationary population. Our study shows that the crude rates of natural increase in the United States are spurious and misleading. We have been living in a fool's paradise heretofore, overlooking altogether the sources of our successive increases. Immigration has enormously padded the proportion of our people at the reproductive ages, and this has, in turn, resulted in increasing our crude birth rates and in decreasing our crude death rates. If, on the other hand, we determine what the present birth rate would be if the age distribution of our population were the result of a prolonged continuation of our present rate of procreation, unaffected by padding from without, you will find that the figure would fall from 23 per 1,000, which it is approxi-

mately today, to well below 20 per 1,000; and the corresponding death rate would increase from a little over 12, the present crude figure, to well over 15. The effect of these two corrections resulting from an artificial age distribution, will be ultimately to reduce the rate of natural increase from over one per cent. per annum to only one-half of one per cent. Our crude birth rate, however, is falling very rapidly. It has declined over 30 per cent. in the last thirty years and the end is not yet in sight. How much lower it may go, I do not know. But, even at its present level and with our current death rate, it will take over 120 years to double our numbers if we continue to depend on natural increase alone. These figures agree closely with the estimates of Professor PEARL, who, on biological assumptions, forecasted a population of close to two hundred millions in 2040. Certainly, no country with the wealth of natural resources of the United States will fail to provide its people with the necessities of civilized life if it continues to increase so slowly.

Another and perhaps more instructive approach is to consider the number of births that it requires under present conditions of mortality to keep our population stationary. According to the mortality and marital rates prevailing in 1920, it is necessary on the average for every ten married couples to have 26 children in order to replace the original quota from which the parents sprang. But, not all families have children; one marriage in every six is either sterile or does not lead to live issue. The burden of childbearing, therefore, falls on the remaining families, every ten of whom must have not 26 but 31 children. In other words, present conditions of mortality and fecundity require that families having children shall average better than three in order to maintain a stationary population. All groups of urban American families recently investigated have shown fewer children than this minimum. It is only because of the greater fertility of the newcomers and of those in most rural areas that our annual figures of increase show up as favorably as they do. I would venture the opinion that this very audience would, on investigation, illustrate the current tendency that those who are most able to assume the obligations of parenthood are not reproducing themselves.

This state of affairs is almost altogether a new thing. Until recently, it was the American fashion to have good-sized families. Professors BABER and ROSS, investigating this subject

among middle class families of the present generation in the Middle West, found a shrinkage in family size from 5.4 to 3.3 children in the course of one generation. This is equivalent to a drop of 38 per cent. in the number of offspring in the space of only a relatively few years. Others have found exactly the same situation in other localities. The tendency toward small families has apparently become a fixed habit among the American people. I cannot consider the underlying causes for the decline in our birth rate except to point to the very obvious influence of the widespread knowledge of contraceptive methods. One would imagine from your literature that such methods were a recent discovery which, if only applied generally, would release a long suffering world from all its troubles. But, this is clearly a misconception. There is evidence on all sides that birth control practices are in vogue to an enormous degree in the United States. Every doctor, every nurse, every druggist, and every social worker, will, I believe, admit as much. In no other way can we explain the falling birth rate of the country in recent years.

Knowledge of contraceptive methods is more widely practiced here than in any other country of the world, except Germany and Austria, where the aftermath of the war has taken all desire and incentive for living out of the hearts of the masses. Holland, which you consider the exemplar of voluntary parenthood, shows a birth rate of 26 per 1,000 as compared with 23 in the United States.

It is, therefore, not true that we are multiplying too rapidly and that we must resort to a nationwide policy of birth reduction to keep our population within reasonable bounds. The real danger, if there is one, lies rather in the change in our internal composition which will follow a too rapidly declining birth rate and our approach to a stationary population. There is always grave danger in such a shift of weakening the social organization by increasing the proportion of defective and dependent stock. For it is always the least desirable parents who are the last to curtail their fecundity. We, likewise, unduly increase the percentage of old people, whose support falls, more or less, upon the young who, therefore, face the prospect in coming years of carrying greater burdens. We must remember, too, that the greatness of America and of our large cities has reflected the prevailing enthusiasm and youth of our people. The spirit of adventure and of progress go well together

and have been the outstanding characteristics of our young and vigorous nation. New York, which is the youngest large city in the world in the average age of its citizens, is a striking example of the power and ability of youth. Reducing the proportion of our young people, as we shall by curtailing birth rates, will at once modify the whole spirit of our intellectual and economic life. This is not a hypothetical but a very real danger confronting the country to which little attention has as yet been paid. It is always amazing to me to consider how little we have learned from the perfectly obvious story of the population changes of France and how ready we are to travel her easy road to national misfortune.

Your movement has also thriven on a series of confusions of thought. Your efforts have been especially directed to the amelioration of the lot of that large number of poor people who, you say, have suffered from ignorance of contraceptive knowledge. You certainly have made no plea for those whose favorable economic and social status would readily enable them to bring into the world normal children and to give them every possible advantage for future citizenship. Yet, it is among these very people who need it least that contraceptive information is most widely disseminated and most intensively used. Such activity is distinctly anti-social; for it enables selfish people to escape their proper responsibilities, ultimately to their own detriment and certainly to the injury of the State. You have also won much sympathy for your program through the assumption that it works in the direction of social and economic improvement of the poor. But obviously economic battles cannot be fought by other than economic weapons. The way to meet low wages, bad housing and the other evidences of maladjustment is to attack them directly through a broad social programme including the better organization of industry, more equitable means of distribution, constructive legislation and those other methods which are gradually bringing about a better day. You do not solve the worker's problems by encouraging him to lose his greatest and noblest possession, his children. On the contrary, you help to maintain the *status quo* by accepting present economic maladjustments without a struggle.

The very first question which arises, then, is how best to regulate the granting of contraceptive information and not how to devise methods for its indiscriminate broadcasting.

The State expresses clearly in its legislation that such information shall be restricted to cases where the life or health of the mother is in danger. There is undoubtedly a larger group to whom information may be extended with propriety and to the welfare of all concerned. But how shall that group be defined? What demarcations shall be enforced? Shall contraceptive information be available to those who have already borne several children? Obviously, you would not put such information into the hands of young boys or girls. No sane community would dream of permitting it. What consideration shall be given to the economic status of families or other sociological factors in releasing such information? These and other vital questions must be faced and answered before your association is justified in launching a nationwide programme of birth control.

4 My next objection is that you have proceeded without sufficient proof of the efficacy and the safety of the measures which you suggest. Have you not a moral obligation to assure those whom you wish to help that the procedures you sponsor are at once effective and harmless? The best medical opinion informs me that you are, in fact, not prepared to make any such guarantees. You have collected no evidence on which to predicate the measure of your success. Such information as is available indicates clearly that there is still a large element of uncertainty in the suggested procedures. Those who have studied the work of the so-called birth control clinics abroad have been equally unable to discover approved methods in general use. But, more vital, is the question of safety. Are contraceptive practices, in fact, without hazard to those who indulge in them? Gynecologists and obstetricians of the highest standing have been very suspicious of some of the devices in use and have traced serious affections back to them. Has that been answered? Have you eliminated altogether the possibility that such practices result in permanent sterility of young married women? I know nothing so tragic as the case of young people who avoid children in the first years of their married life only to find later that they cannot have them when they want them. The number of childless marriages is rapidly increasing to the point of becoming a first-class problem, and there is good evidence that contraceptive practices by young people may have a good deal to do with it. What is your answer to the constantly recurring charge that various contraceptive practices lead to mental disorders affecting either the

husband or the wife? And what is the usual effect on the spiritual life of those who, through continued control, keep their families down to next to nothing? This is probably the most serious single consequence of the current fashion. I do not put this at your door, for there are many causes. But nowhere, to my knowledge, has your voice been raised to warn those who, desiring more comfort and ease for themselves, lose the greatest of all blessings and the source of our deepest inspiration, a family to provide for and to live for. Therein lies the well-spring of character development for adults which is choked and forfeited for what usually turns out to be a mess of useless baggage.

I could elaborate my objections were there more time; but I hope I have traced most of them with sufficient clearness to suggest that all is not well with the present organization and programme of your society. In closing, may I be permitted a few constructive remarks? You have, heretofore, limited yourselves almost entirely to arousing sympathy for those who have suffered from over-large families. Today, you might very well take up the other side of the picture and help arouse public sentiment in favor of fairly good-sized families among the rank and file of normal people. Help to set the fashion, not for large families—the day for that is over—but for families of at least three children and as many more as can be readily and effectively taken care of. One should expect a well balanced theory of parenthood from a society such as yours. Your organization could also enormously increase its usefulness by shifting its emphasis from the dissemination of propaganda to the organization of scientific research. What is most vitally needed today is more light on the problem of population and not wider dissemination of questionable contraceptive practices through such agencies as your current publications. Your magazines, sold promiscuously on street corners, are especially offensive and alienate the good will of many thoughtful people. Your first concern, in my judgment, should be to encourage study and investigation of the various aspects of your subject in the spirit of science which all could approve. In this way, you will win the enthusiastic support and cooperation of population experts, and especially of the medical profession. Through such an alliance, you may well be able to remove many of the obstacles which now hinder your progress. One cannot over-emphasize the necessity for adequate records of your cases, their close

follow-up and careful analysis. Only through this means will you develop a sound policy. It is gratifying to note from the character of your present programme that you are already working along these scientific and constructive lines. It is my hope that as your programme of unbiased investigation develops, you may win the support of all forward-looking citizens and become true leaders in one of the most important movements of our time.

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